

Corporate Scrutiny Committee – 6 June 2023

Written question from Oliver Tucker of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

In point 6 of the school place planning document, we are told that “popular schools remain in full or close to full and this may mean that a large drop in numbers could significantly affect a small number of ‘less popular’ schools. When schools are disproportionately affected by falling rolls, those schools are at risk of spiralling decline. This means that we need to consider removing places.”

How exactly has St Mary’s school been identified by yourselves as less popular and deserving of closure when it has a rising roll and 28 children due to start in September
- Does this not qualify as being ‘close to full’?

Response

Thank you for your recent question submitted to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee about the primary school place planning paper that was due to be discussed at the Isle of Wight Cabinet on Thursday 8 June 2023.

The Isle of Wight Council’s Children’s Services Management Team were asked to draft this paper following a discussion on forecast pupil numbers at the September 2022 Policy and Scrutiny Committee for Children’s Services, Education and Skills.

However, as the Cabinet has decided that the paper will no longer be presented and therefore the recommendations will not be taken forward for public consultation, a response to your questions is no longer appropriate.

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Written question from Rebecca Tucker of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Following the Equality Act of 2010, the council have a responsibility to “foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.” How is shutting the only Catholic primary school in Ryde and the surrounding areas fulfilling this obligation?

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Written question from Richard Cottell of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Why were stakeholders (including the diocese, teachers, and parents) in St Mary's Catholic Primary School not informed of a possible closure prior to publication of the story in the local press - Does this not undermine the 10% of funding provided by non-governmental stakeholders (the diocese and parents)?

Response

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Written question from Jane Berry of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

With climate change so high on the Government's agenda, how can you justify the mileage for Ryde parents wanting a Catholic school who will now need to travel to East Cowes, Totland or Carisbrooke in order for their child/ren to access such an education?

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Written question from James Ranson of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

With three housing developments planned for Ryde (Pennyfeathers, Puckpool and West Acre Park), have you considered where incoming families will send their children to school - With parents having the right to choose a faith-based education for their children, how will you ensure that you provide such a choice when you have targeted the one Catholic school in the area for closure?

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Written question from Vicki Ranson of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

According to the Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019, 3 areas on the Isle of Wight, Ryde North-East, Pan A and B were ranked as among the most deprived in England. There is a strong link between deprivation and low educational attainment. In October 2021, the Isle of Wight Council were questioned over their commitment to tackling island poverty. From my understanding, the IW Council have approved plans to build 474 new houses on the West Acre site, which neighbours this deprivation area. The IW Council have approved closure of a local dairy farm, kept the local water park shut from the community and now threatened closure of a School.

With the announcements of the potential closure of St Mary's a well-attended, community focused school, how does the IW Council expect to support families and their children in breaking the cycle of deprivation?

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Written question from Cathryn Grosvenor of Wootton to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

If you were to close and sell the St Mary's site (remembering that the diocese and parents have been responsible for 10% of the school's funding), then housing would be a seemingly obvious use for the land. Have you considered where incoming families will send their children to school, with parents having the right to choose a faith-based education for their children, how will you ensure that you provide such a choice when you have targeted the one Catholic school in the area for closure?

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Written question from Lora Coombes of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Have you considered whether there are enough spaces at the three remaining Catholic primary schools for all of the families at St Mary's Catholic Primary School, as these families have all chosen a Catholic education for their children, should they not be provided with a like-for-like alternative if they are suddenly told that their chosen school must close - is any less not discrimination against Catholic education, particularly as alternative Catholic provisions are outside of the five-mile proximity promised to parents for school re-allocation?

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Written question from Simon Coombes of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

In St Mary Primary School's most recent OSTED report, it was said that "*the newly appointed senior leaders have a clear vision for the school. They understand the strengths of the school and are taking effective action to improve outcomes for pupils*". This is after they had been in post for less than a term. In your press release, Councillor Debbie Andre talks of "providing excellent education for our children." How then has the council selected St Mary's as a candidate for possible closure, a school that is on such a strong upward trajectory, led by "effective leaders" with a "clear vision"?

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Written question from Michael Christopher of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Do the Council plan to build a new school in the Ryde area within the next 5 years as the huge increase in housing proposal would leave nowhere for incoming families to send their children to school?

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Written question from Helen Smallwood of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

In point 48 of the school place planning document, it is predicted that Ryde rural schools will have 36.2% of surplus places by September 2024. This is in contrast to 26.8% of surplus places in Ryde itself. Why take such radical steps as to close a school in Ryde Town when the projection for Ryde Rural is considerably worse in the longer term?

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Written question from Lizzie Christopher of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

The announcement of the potential closure of St Mary's Catholic primary school in the local press, prior to any consultation with the community, has now unduly influenced the public opinion that it is a failing school - which is untrue. How can the IW Council justify its conduct in this particular situation, considering this bias approach?

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Written question from Roisin Mullins-Jacobs of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Was standard procedure followed? A lack of investigation/ planning preceded a half term press release on the closure of St. Mary's VA (Ofsted 'Requires Improvement', no closure criteria met), Roman Catholic (19% of UK and separate to CofE), Primary and Preschool, of 212 pupils, (SEN provision), before informing parents and full staff. Possibilities were disregarded; intake reduction, Academy status, relocation or rebuild of fully used site, within the Island's largest town, with the next RC alternative 8.6 miles away, close to developments Puckpool, West Acre Park, and Pennyfeathers, with a rising population and traffic. The faith school had 28/30 places, for Reception 2023, these actions caused distress, and damage to the popular school's reputation (online petition over 1,000) and stability, following return from Covid restrictions / baby boom. This action benefited unpopular / smaller Island schools, as a lack of available Ryde places exist to accommodate siblings and years.

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Written question from Jack Jacobs of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Article 9 of the UN declaration of Human Rights continues to protect our absolute right to practice our religious beliefs without hindrance, whilst Religion and Belief are protected characteristics under Equality Act 2010. The Council is threatening to remove the ability of parents to educate their children within the Roman Catholic faith, by closing St. Mary's Catholic School, Ryde, with no equivalent Roman Catholic schools offered within reasonable distances. Whether intended or not, discriminating solely against Catholic pupils by removing their legal right to follow their belief, when non-discriminatory options were available, represents an intolerable and unlawful interference by the state, particularly when St. Mary's does not meet any of the criteria for closure. What measures is the Council taking to ensure that these rights are not breached for the hundreds of pupils and parents at St. Mary's Catholic School?

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Written question from Sarah Cottell of Ryde to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Why has St Mary's chosen to possibly be closed, considering its advantages below?

- A high intake, 29 in Preschool, 28 due to start Sept 2023
- The building is suitable to accommodate all children in separate classes
- The grounds and surrounding woodland to provide outside learning through forest school and other outside activities, reception/ preschool also have their own separate outdoor playground/ learning areas.
- Appropriate staffing levels and teaching assistants and can offer SEND provisions
- Breakfast club/after school clubs, enabling parents to work
- It is in walking distance for the majority of pupils, myself included, who with 4 children ages 7 and under, and a non-driver, would struggle to get much further
- Is the only Catholic school in Ryde and enables the opportunity for religious learning and expression
- Ofsted report requires improvement, which isn't low, new leadership can provide improvement as we have already seen.

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Written question from Vicki Humm to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Given all of the planning proposals for new housing in Ryde, do you think that you will be forced to build a new school further down the line, is it not short-sighted to close a Ryde school with this in mind?

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Written question from Antonio Entrena Urquia to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Why was the information released to the press before consultation with teachers and parents, has this information not created a bias and predetermined opinion of St Mary's reputation as a school?

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